

Books of The Times

By John Leonard

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS.

Richard Helms and the C.I.A. By Thomas Powers. 393 pages. Knopf. \$12.95.

THE least interesting person in Thomas Powers's splendid new book is Richard Helms himself. He was, for 30 years, a dedicated "spook," "a good soldier" who took orders from "one President at a time," someone so disadvantaged that he could not "resign on principle and live on dividends." A compromiser who knew "you have to go along to get along." He buckled no swashes. From his beginning in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II until the end in November 1972, when Richard M. Nixon dismissed him as Director of Central Intelligence for having been insufficiently loyal to the "team" that gave us Watergate, he opposed covert operations while doing almost exactly what he was told to do: the man in the empty suit.

A child of his next-door neighbors reported in 1947 to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that "he doesn't have any hair on his chest, and I think... waxes it." Daniel Schorr, after Mr. Helms's testimony in 1975 before the Senate's Church committee investigating American intelligence activities, reported: "It turned out as Helms said, that no foreign leader was directly killed by the C.I.A. But it wasn't for want of trying."

Banality vs. Swashbuckling

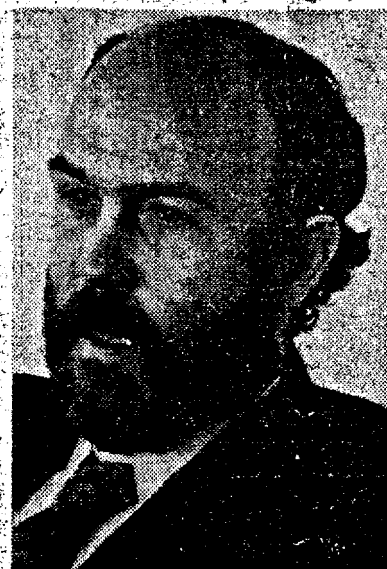
Contrast this blankness with a James Jesus Angleton who, while an undergraduate at Yale, published a literary magazine called *Furioso*, full of poems by Ezra Pound; with a Frank Wisner, who called Philip Graham of *The Washington Post* in the watches of the night, from a hospital bed, to suggest a Herblock cartoon about Nehru, had several nervous breakdowns, and then shot himself; with a William Harvey, who claimed to have gone to bed with a woman every day since he was 12 years old and who always played with a loaded gun on his desk; with a flamboyant Richard Bissell, who gave us the U-2 and the Bay of Pigs; with a Miles Copeland, who delivered \$3 million to Nasser in a suitcase in Egypt without asking for a receipt; with a William Bundy who contributed \$400 to a defense fund for Alger Hiss, and with Desmond Fitzgerald, who perished playing tennis.

Mr. Helms lacked flair. He was banal. The swashbucklers, most of whom seemed to have gone to Groton before graduating to one or another of the Ivy League colleges, managed in their enthusiasm to betray the Ukrainians in the Soviet Union, the Nationalist Chinese in Burma, the Sumatrans in Indonesia, the Khambas in Tibet, the Cubans in Miami, the Meos in Laos, the Montagnards in Vietnam and the Kurds in Iraq.

The cohorts of Mr. Helms were not entirely incompetent. They got rid of Mossadegh in Iran and Arbenz in Guatemala. They acquiesced in the elimination of Diem in South Vietnam. But, in their dangerous naiveté, they failed to nail down Sukarno, Lumumba and Fidel Castro. Under the auspices of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles was obsessed with "neutralists" like Nehru; John and Robert Kennedy, not to mention Robert S. McNamara, wanted to separate President Castro from his beard; Lyndon B. Johnson required lights at the end of the tunnel he was digging, and Mr. Nixon insisted on a certain amount of silent complicity in the occasional wiretap and second-story job. We won't go into the medical experiments and Chile.

Mr. Helms would doubtless prefer not to think about President Castro at all — the contaminating of sugar exports, the poisoned pens and handkerchiefs and scuba-diving wet suits and cigars, the exploding seashells and the Mafia. Perhaps he worries about the missing nuclear generator somewhere in the Indian Himalayas. He is no longer permitted to consult "Walnut," the computer system that can "pop out the 1934 graduating class of a Sverdlovsk high school at a moment's notice." He may be, instead, reading the Ian Fleming and E. Howard Hunt Jr. novels. He "detested" John Le Carré's "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold." One of his predecessors, Allen Dulles, used to pass on plots to Helen MacInnes, just to keep the cold war bubbling.

The Russians use umbrellas to kill people. Is this significant?



Martha Kaplan

Thomas Powers

Let's Buy a Government

From the start, in Italy, the cold war was what the C.I.A. was all about: let's try to buy a Government. Later on, the Government was Chile. Mr. Helms moved the paper around on his desk. He might as well have been working for an insurance company. When he perjured himself on various questions having to do with the C.I.A.'s involvement in Chile, he seemed, genuinely, not to understand what all the fuss was about. Hadn't he kept his mouth shut most of the time? Why weren't his friends taking care of him? With Edward Bennett Williams, he didn't need any friends. His sentence was suspended, so that he could go to the Kenwood Country Club, where 400 retired C.I.A. officers gave him a standing ovation.

Mr. Helms, a clerk, is not the point. Mr. Powers, who wrote a good book on the futility and stupidity of left-wing terrorism in this country, "Diana: The Making of a Terrorist," has written an excellent book on blankness and banality, the best book on the C.I.A. ever written. The blankness at the middle is a blankness of character, of careerism. If we need an intelligence service, and we do, it should gather and evaluate information, as it does, and submit its disinterested conclusions to its client, the President of the United States. It has no business mounting covert operations or "secret wars" and lying about them. It ought to enlist scientists, not crusaders or opportunists. It might even tell the truth to Congress, when Congress bothers to ask.